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Midhat Pasha and 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Akka: The Historical Background of the Tablet of the Land of Bā¹

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Abstract

In God Passes By, Shoghi Effendi mentions various distinguished political and other figures who met 'Abdu'l-Baha. Among them were several Ottoman officials who were friendly towards Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha. One of them was the outstanding liberal Ottoman statesman Midhat Pasha, who, as the governor general (vâli) of Ottoman Syria, invited 'Abdu'l-Baha ('Abbas Effendi) to Beirut. To date, there have been only very few references to this meeting between these two figures. On the occasion of 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut, Baha'u'llah revealed the Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bā, the Tablet of the Land of Bā (Beirut), in honour of his son. Hitherto, the circumstances and exact date of this remained unclear.

The object of this paper is to present the background of this episode in Baha'i history in the light of a manuscript by the eminent Baha'i Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali Isfahani that has surfaced recently. His previously unknown account of the visit of Midhat Pasha to 'Akka, during which Midhat Pasha met 'Abdu'l-Baha prior to the latter's visit to Beirut, provides new information on the circumstances surrounding the revelation of the Tablet of the Land of Bā. With the help of other sources we are also able to determine when this episode took place. Before this discussion, the life and activities of Midhat Pasha are briefly outlined. An annotated translation of Mirza Haydar 'Ali's account is appended to this article.

Midhat Pasha and his governorship in Syria

Midhat Pasha (1822–1884),² whose real name was Ahmed Şefik, was a highly capable and outstanding official of the 19th century Ottoman Empire. During his childhood he studied and memorized the Qur'an and therefore earned the title *hâfiz*; later he learned Arabic, Persian and French.³ From his adolescence on, Ahmed Şefik was engaged in official work in Istanbul,

¹ This paper was read in the absence of the author at the Religious Studies Seminar of the Association for Baha'i Studies (English-Speaking Europe), Newcastle (UK), 10–12 December 2004. I thank the participants for their comments.

² Franz Babinger, 'Midhat Pāshā', in: *Enzyklopädie des Islam*, vols. 1–4 and supplement (Brill: Leiden, 1913) 3:555–57; M. Tayyib Gökbilgin, 'Midhat Paşa', in: *Islam Ansiklopedisi* (Istanbul: Milli Eğitim Basımevi, 1960) 8:270–82; Roderic H. Davison, 'Midhat Pāshā', in: *The Encyclopedia of Islam* (Leiden: Brill, 1991) 6:1031–35. These three articles list extensive primary and secondary literature on Midhat Pasha. An interesting novel about Midhat Pasha's private life and political activities based on historical sources is Hıfzı Topuz, *Taif'le Ölüm* (Death in Taif), (Istanbul: Remzi Kitabevi, 1999). There are recent academic articles about him that are too many to be listed here.

³ Midhat Pasha also wrote a short commentary on the Quranic 'Basmala', i.e. *Bismi'llāhi'r-raḥmāni'r-raḥīm* ('In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful'), and on the first chapter, the *Sūrat al-Fātiha*; see Şehbenderzāde Filibeli Ahmed Hilmi, 'Midhat Paşa Merhûmun Besmele ve Fātiha Tefsiri', *Hikmet*

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Bulgaria and other places. He served as secretary in the *Divân-ı Hümâyün* (Imperial Chancery of State), where he received the nom de plume 'Midhat' (laudable action, encomium); he was employed in the *Sadâret Mektubî Kalemi* (Office of Letters of the Grand Vizier), and at the governorate in Damascus and Sayda, to mention only a few of his posts. From 1854 to 1857 Midhat had the difficult task of maintaining order in Rumelia (European Turkey), where Bulgarian rebels and brigands were opposing the authorities. After the successful completion of this duty, Midhat toured Europe for six months. In 1859 he headed the inquiry regarding the Kuleli uprising in Istanbul, which was organized by reactionary forces aimed at deposing the reform-minded Sultan Abdülmecid (r. 1839–1861). Midhat was appointed *vâli* (governor general) of Niş (in present-day Serbia) in the year 1861, and, owing to his successful reforms, Sultan Abdülaziz (r. 1861–1876) made him *vâli* of the Tuna province, which comprised modern Bulgaria. This province was created in 1864 as a 'pilot project', and Midhat had the task of inaugurating a general reform programme (*nizâmnâme*) for the Ottoman administration, based on experiences there. He established local councils in towns and villages for the pursuit of public works, science and education; laid the foundation of the still extant Bank of Agriculture (*Ziraat Bankası*) by establishing a cash department; arranged for fiscal relaxations and opened public technical schools. Later, in 1868, he was summoned to Istanbul and led reforms in the juridical, educational and financial sectors. In the course of his governorship in Baghdad (1869–1872) Midhat again carried out successful reforms in various fields. At the end of this office, Sultan Abdülaziz appointed him as grand vizier. This, however, lasted only three months because Midhat was regarded as being too independent of the Sultan. He was also removed from Istanbul in 1873 and appointed *vâli* in Selanik (Thessaloniki in present Greece) as a result of his proposal for representative government. It is apparent that Midhat entertained difficult relations with the sultans in his drive for democratic reforms but, despite his dissidence, he was regularly reappointed to different positions because of his ability to improve the affairs of the state in the provinces.

All of the administrative activities of Midhat Pasha covered the years 1839–1878, which are known as the *Tanzimat-ı Hayriyye* (beneficial reordering, reform) period in the history of the late Ottoman Empire. The reforms were proclaimed basically through three imperial edicts in 1839, 1856 and 1876. The first and second edicts paved the way for the proclamation of the *Kânûn-ı Esâsî* ('Constitutional Law'), the first Ottoman (Turkish) constitution, which was announced on 28 December 1876. Midhat Pasha drafted a constitution called *Kânûn-ı Cedid* ('New Law'), together with the poet-statesman Namık Kemal, but Abdülhamid refused it and instead had the constitution of France translated and announced this as the *Kânûn-ı Esâsî*. Namık Kemal and his friend Ziya Pasha were among the founders of the 'Young Ottoman' reform movement a decade earlier with the aim of democratizing the Ottoman Empire in a synthesis of Islamic and Western ideas.

The central theme of the *Kânûn-ı Esâsî* was to restrict to some extent the exercise of the powers of the Sultan and to introduce the idea of a parliamentary system. Among other aspects, this constitution covered basic rights and privileges, and the reform decrees were partially directed toward winning the support of European powers and re-emphasized the equality of all subjects under the law. These decrees were formulated after European models and moved away from the Islamic shariah. However, the main goal of the reforms was to preserve the Ottoman state. Sultan Abdülaziz was deposed and died (in 1876) while Midhat

(newspaper), 25 Rabîu'l-Âhir 1328 (5 May 1910), no. 3, pp. 2–3; published by Mustafa Özel, 'Midhat Paşa'nın Besmele ve Fâtiha Tefsiri', *Marife* (journal), no. 2, 2003; online at <http://www.marife.org/8-ozel.htm> (accessed 23 June 2004).

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Pasha was prime minister and, following the three month reign of Sultan Murad V, Abdülhamid II became Sultan in 1876. Though he initially accepted the constitution (*meşrutiyet*) and parliament (*Meclis-i Meb'usân*), in 1878 he closed the parliament down and strengthened his position as absolute ruler for 33 years until he was overthrown by the Young Turk revolution (1908–1909), and the constitution and parliament were again put into effect.

Midhat Pasha's fate was determined by article 113 of the constitution, which he himself had added, giving the sultan the right to remove or exile 'dangerous persons'. Abdülhamid was greatly disturbed by Midhat's liberal views that undermined his authority. To understand his attitude toward Midhat, we have to keep in mind that the sultan accused him of the murder of his uncle Abdülaziz. In his memoirs, however, Abdülhamid states that he did not have any grudges against Midhat, admired his work as governor but disapproved of his political views.⁴

Abdülhamid made use of his right to change the prime minister, dismissed Midhat from his second term of office as grand vizier (December 1876 – February 1877) and, in accordance with article 113, ordered him to leave the Ottoman domains. Following an extended stay in Europe – by that time Midhat was celebrated there as 'the father of the constitution' – he was sent as governor general to Syria in late November 1878. Abdülhamid thus continued his scheming against the liberal pasha by removing him from Istanbul and putting him under the yoke of organising state affairs in the problematic province of Syria.

Whereas Midhat had all kinds of power during his previous governorships, Abdülhamid denied this to him in Syria, thinking that his minister wanted decentralisation in that region to increase his own power.⁵ A German source gives some idea of the concerns and ideals of Midhat Pasha. It is recorded that he visited the Templer Colony in Haifa on 'Pentecost Monday' (17 May) 1880. He had come overland to Palestine on a tour of inspection via Tiberias, Nazareth and 'Akka and left Haifa on the same day for Beirut with the Austrian Lloyd steamship that was awaiting him. In Haifa, Midhat inquired in detail about the affairs and needs of the community; he thanked the Templers for their efforts and for being a good example for the local population through their institutions, and wished them continued existence and success. Also, the *vâli* showed utmost admiration for the diligence and endeavours of the colonists and said to the officials in his company that it was a shame that they (the Turks) could not achieve something similar. The pasha added that 'Turkey' had been stagnant in its development and thus turned to Europe for instructors in military institutions and the navy, industry and trade and would also need specialists in agriculture. He was not only very pleased to find a colony that met this need but promised to support its endeavours with whatever was in his power. For this he pointed out to the pasha of 'Akka and the *kaymakam* (head of the district) of Haifa, who were with him, that it was their duty to grant all possible facilities and support to the colonists and not to complicate things, as had happened in the past. Furthermore it is stated that Midhat Pasha was the first senior 'Turkish'

⁴ İsmet Bozdağ, *Abdülhamid'in Hatıra Defteri* (Istanbul: Pınar Yayınları, 1985) 13–15.

⁵ For details of Midhat Pasha as governor of Syria, see e.g. Ali Haydar Midhat, *The Life of Midhat Pasha* (Arno Press: New York, 1973, reprint of the 1903 ed. published by Murray, London) 178–80; Bilal Şimşir, *Fransız Belgelerine Göre; Midhat Paşanın sonu (1878–1884): les dernières années de Midhat Pacha (d'après les documents français)* (Ankara: Ayyıldız Matbaası, 1970) 15–38; Najib Saliba, 'The Achievements of Midhat Pasha as Governor of the Province of Syria, 1878–1880', *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 9 (1979) 307–323; and Butrus Abu-Manneh, 'The Genesis of Midhat Pasha's Governorship in Syria 1878–1880', in Thomas Philipp/Birgit Schaebler (eds.), *The Syrian Land: Processes of Integration and Fragmentation in Bilād al-Shām from the 18th to the 20th Century* (Berliner Islamstudien Band 6, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1998) 251–67. On his reform proposal for Syria, see Hüseyin Tosun, ed., *Suriye Lâyihası* (Istanbul: Matbaa ve Kütüphane-i Cihan, 1324/1906–07).

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official who acknowledged and appreciated the efforts and success of the Templers, and that Midhat Pasha was a man who correctly judged the situation of 'Turkey' and was eager to bring about better conditions. However, the writer asked prophetically whether the Ottoman government in Istanbul would support the endeavours of Midhat Pasha or rather put obstacles in his way, unless he was backed up by substantial foreign aid. It was hoped that the *vâli* would have sufficient time and space to take steps for the good of that underdeveloped region and would fulfil the promises of support that he had given the Templers, the aim of whom was the welfare of the land.⁶ The plans for a more prosperous and orderly Syrian province did not materialize. Sultan Abdülhamid made a great effort to undermine the reform attempts of Midhat Pasha. It was in the course of this strenuous period that Midhat Pasha visited 'Akka and had an encounter with 'Abdu'l-Baha, prior to their meeting in Beirut.

After several offers of resignation that were rejected, Midhat was recalled in August 1880, ordered to Izmir as governor of the Aydın province and finally charged, in 1881, with the murder of Sultan Abdülaziz, in spite of the latter's confirmed suicide. Due to Western pressure and especially as a result of British diplomacy, Abdülhamid turned the death sentence into life-long imprisonment in remote Taif on the Arabian Peninsula. However, on 8 May 1884 Abdülhamid ordered Midhat Pasha – who was called 'father of the liberals' (*Abu'l-Ahrâr*) by his supporters, and who had displayed tolerance toward other religions and cared for the well-being of the generations after him – to be strangled.⁷

Midhat Pasha and the Baha'is

Before we discuss 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut and the circumstances leading to it, let us briefly look at Midhat Pasha's relationship with the Baha'is. At present, two previous encounters of Midhat Pasha with Baha'is can be established. The first was when some 70 Baha'is were exiled from Baghdad to Mosul in 1868, after Baha'u'llah was banished to Istanbul. According to a Baha'i source this occurred through the instigation of the Persian consul in Baghdad, Mirza Buzurg Khan. Midhat Pasha, who became *vâli* of Baghdad in 1869, was passing through Mosul and, seeing that the Baha'i captives (*usarâ*) were treated badly, he administered justice towards them and set them all free (*hukm-i 'adl dar haqq-i usarâ namûdih hamih-râ âzâd sâkht*).⁸ Another Baha'i account, without specifying the source, maintains that the Baha'is were forced to stay in Mosul for twenty years and does not mention Midhat Pasha.⁹ It may be that some Baha'is were freed and others had to stay.¹⁰

⁶ Letter of Friedrich Lange (a Templer teacher), dated 30 May 1880, published on 24 June 1880 in the Templer weekly journal *Süddeutsche Warte*; in Alex Carmel, *Palästina-Chronik 1853 bis 1882: Deutsche Zeitungsberichte vom Krimkrieg bis zur ersten jüdischen Einwanderungswelle* (Ulm: Vaas Verlag, 1978) 324–25.

⁷ Abdülhamid himself says that Midhat was not involved in Abdülaziz's death; *Abdülhamid'in Hatıra Defteri* 15.

⁸ Asadu'llah Fadil Mazandarani, *Tārīkh-i Zuhūr al-Haqq* 5:62 (see <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/arabic/vol3/tzh5/5tzh.htm>, viewed 15 November 2004). I am grateful to Sohail Farhad for this reference.

⁹ 'These refugees were subjected to severe hardships in Mosul. When they arrived, some of the inhabitants crowded on to the rooftops and threw stones at them. The shopkeepers refused to sell them food and no one would give them shelter. It took a long time for them to settle in Mosul. After much privation and difficulties most of them managed to engage in some work, sharing their modest income with each other. They remained in Mosul for about twenty years.' (Adib Taherzadeh, *The Revelation of Baha'u'llah*, 4 vols., Oxford: George Ronald, 1974–1987, 2:334)

¹⁰ Hasan Balyuzi notes that one Baha'i stayed 'a few years' in Mosul and then left for 'Akka (*Baha'u'llah: The King of Glory*, Oxford: George Ronald, 1980, 2nd ed. 1991, 477).

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The second recorded contact of Midhat Pasha with Baha'is is based on a British consular report. When Nasiru'd-Din Shah intended to visit the holy cities of Karbala and Najaf in 1870, the Persian Foreign Minister, Mirza Sa'id Khan, considering security, asked the Ottoman authorities to remove the 'Babis' (Baha'is) in Baghdad. Charles Herbert, the British consul in Baghdad at that time, mentions in a letter that he was informed of the arrests of Babis in Baghdad and asked the *vâli*, Midhat Pasha, about the situation. The latter told Elliott that he had received orders from Istanbul to take measures 'with the view of preventing the occurrence of any acts on their part that might endanger the safety of His Majesty or give cause of umbrage', and that he 'had called upon the Babis to retire for a time from this city and had even offered assistance to those who might be without the means of travelling'.¹¹ Midhat Pasha is furthermore reported to have stated that he had asked 'principal known members of that sect' to leave Baghdad for a certain period and that he himself was reluctant to persecute decent subjects of the Empire and did not have problems with their religious ideas. Yet the *vâli* stressed that, in the interest of the safety of the Shah, it was compulsory to act thus.¹² It seems that through these occurrences and perhaps others, Midhat Pasha came to know about 'Abdu'l-Baha and later met him in 'Akka, which resulted in their meeting in Beirut.

'By the express invitation' of Midhat Pasha: 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut

Baha'i sources stress the importance of 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut, during the course of which he met not only Midhat Pasha but also other notables. According to Shoghi Effendi, it was through 'Abdu'l-Baha's widespread influence that the Baha'i Faith gained respect among a wide circle of officials and intellectuals in the Middle East: 'It was through the extraordinarily warm reception accorded Him during His visit to Beirut, through His contact with Midhat Pasha, a former Grand Vizir of Turkey [sic], ... and through His constant association with officials, notables and leading ecclesiastics who, in increasing number had besought His presence, during the final years of His Father's ministry, that He had succeeded in raising the prestige of the Cause He had championed to a level it had never previously attained.'¹³ The significance of this 'historic journey, unparalleled in the religious annals of mankind',¹⁴ from the Baha'i viewpoint, is that Midhat Pasha invited 'Abdu'l-Baha at a time when the latter was a prisoner of the Ottomans, and the official edict of Sultan Abdülaziz ordering the exile of Baha'u'llah and his followers and their strict confinement in 'Akka was

¹¹ Herbert to Elliott, No. 5, 17 August 1870: FO 195 949, cited in Momen, *The Babi and Baha'i Religions: Some Contemporary Western Accounts, 1844–1944* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1981) 267.

¹² Ibid. On the visit of the Shah, without a reference to the Babis, see Midhat Pasha, *Tabsira-i Ibret* and *Mir'ât-i Hayret* (2 vols. in one, Istanbul: Hilal Matbaası, 1325/1906–07) 1: 95–96. In a letter to the Persian ambassador Mirza Husayn Khan Mushiru'd-Dawlih in Istanbul, Nasiru'd-Din Shah refers to the Babis in Iraq and states that although Midhat Pasha was entrusted with this matter, no concrete steps were taken. He thus commissioned Husayn Khan to communicate with the province of Baghdad in order to arrest and imprison whoever was, or seemed to be, a Babi; the Shah expected the utmost effort in this matter. This letter is in the Archives of the Iranian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (*Arshv-i Umûr-i Vizârat-i Khârijiyyih*), AVUHI-AM/25, 54; quoted in Mohammad Reza Nasiri, *Nâsireddin Şah zamanında Osmanlı-Iran münasebetleri (1848–1896)*, (Tokio: Institute for the Study of Languages and Cultures of Asia and Africa, 1991) 151–52.

¹³ *God Passes By* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1979 second printing) 242.

¹⁴ Balyuzi, *Baha'u'llah* 378.

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still valid.¹⁵ In honour of 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut, Baha'u'llah revealed the *Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bā*, or the Tablet of the Land of Ba (Beirut).¹⁶ Here, as in several other writings, Baha'u'llah extols the station of 'Abdu'l-Baha, whom he calls the 'Most Mighty Branch of God'. In the words of Shoghi Effendi, this tablet was 'a communication which He dictated to His amanuensis' as 'a glowing tribute, glorifying Him as the One "round Whom all names revolve," as "the Most Mighty Branch of God," and as "His ancient and immutable Mystery."¹⁷ Shoghi Effendi provides the date for neither the visit nor this eulogy. Speaking about the house of 'Udi Khammar, to which Baha'u'llah and his family had moved in 1873, he states that 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut, at the invitation of Midhat Pasha, occurred about that time.¹⁸ However, the source of the material regarding 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut is not provided here, nor is it in subsequent references¹⁹ nor does Midhat Pasha mention this in his memoirs.²⁰

The Baha'i historian Hasan Balyuzi offers different dates for 'Abdu'l-Baha's Beirut visit. In his work *'Abdu'l-Baha*, he says that 'Abdu'l-Baha travelled to Beirut 'by the express invitation of one of the most brilliant statesmen of the Ottoman Empire – Midhat Pasha, the liberal reformer, who as grand vizier was instrumental in inducing the Sultan to grant a constitution to his people'.²¹ He adds that this 'must have taken place sometime in 1878, and on this occasion Baha'u'llah revealed a Tablet [*Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bā*] to commemorate and mark its significance'.²² However, given the fact that Midhat Pasha arrived in Syria as the *vāli* at the end of November 1878, it is not likely that 'Abdu'l-Baha visited him right at the beginning of his governorship and 'sometime in 1878' could apply only to December that year.

Balyuzi then says, in the first edition of his book *Baha'u'llah: The King of Glory* (1980), 'Sometime in 1879, 'Abdu'l-Baha travelled to Beirut',²³ but in the revised edition of this book (1991) the date of the visit has been changed to 'In June 1880'.²⁴ The question arose as to why this change was made without an explanation. At this point our attention turned to possible records outside Baha'i sources. Newspapers generally mention arrivals and departures of notables anywhere, as did newspapers in the Middle East. It seemed plausible that 'Abdu'l-Baha's visit to Beirut was announced by a newspaper, since he was well known and respected

¹⁵ The edict is in the Başbakanlık Osmanlı Arşivi (Ottoman Archives) in Istanbul, Turkey, *Iradele/Meclis-i Mahsus* 1475–1, dated 20 Rabi' al-awwal 1285/12 July 1868.

¹⁶ The Arabic original is published in *Majmū'ih-ī az Alwāh-i Jamāl-i Aqdas-i Abhā kih ba'd az Kitāb-i Aqdas Nāzil Shudih* (Langenhain: Baha'i-Verlag, 137 B.E./1980) 138; English trans. in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1988) 227–28.

¹⁷ *God Passes By* 243; the amanuensis was Mirza Aqa Jan (see below).

¹⁸ Ibid 193.

¹⁹ Both Shoghi Effendi and Hasan Balyuzi may have the information from Husayn 'Avarih' Ayati, *al-Kawākib ad-Durriyya*, (Cairo: Matba'at as-Sa'āda, 1924, see <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/vol4/kd2/kd2.htm>, viewed 15 November 2004) 2:17. This is discussed below.

²⁰ Midhat Pasha, *Tabsira-i Ibret* and *Mir'āt-ı Hayret* (2 vols. in one, Istanbul 1325/1906–07). In modern Turkish: Osman Selim Kocahanoğlu (ed.): *Midhat Paşa'nın Hatıraları: Hayatım İbret Olsun* and *Yıldız Mahkemesi ve Taij Zindam* (Temel: Istanbul 2003). Moreover no reference to this is made by his son Ali Haydar Midhat in *The life of Midhat Pasha: a record of his services, political reforms, banishment, and judicial murder derived from private documents and reminiscences by his son Ali Haydar Midhat Bey* (London: John Murray, 1903); idem *Midhat-Pacha: sa vie - son oeuvre* (Paris: Stock, 1908). Ali Haydar may have omitted Baha'i references.

²¹ Hasan M. Balyuzi, *'Abdu'l-Baha* (George Ronald: London 1971) 37–38.

²² Ibid 38.

²³ Balyuzi, *Baha'u'llah* 378.

²⁴ Ibid.

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not only in the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the Arabic Beirut-based weekly *Thamarāt al-Funūn* announced 'Abdu'l-Baha's arrival on 8 June 1880 with these words: 'His Excellency, the learned, erudite, intelligent and illustrious 'Abbas Effendi, resident of the city of 'Akka, has arrived in our city. The purpose of his arrival is change of air, may God prolong his well-being.'²⁵ In line with this, 'Abdu'l-Baha must have arrived in Beirut around that date. Yet no reference with regard to 'Abdu'l-Baha's departure could be found.²⁶

The 'mystery' of the Beirut visit was solved after elucidation by the publisher of Balyuzi's book and the Baha'i World Centre. According to the publisher, a letter of 'Abdu'l-Baha was found in the Baha'i World Centre Archives in Haifa, dated a week after his return from Beirut, in which he states that he was in Beirut between 1 and 17 June 1880. The publisher also states that Baha'u'llah's Tablet of the Land of Bā was written on 9 June 1880, a week or so after his departure. This was all recorded in a list and this is why 'In June of 1880' replaced 'Sometime in 1879' in the revised 1991 edition of the book.²⁷ However, in a memorandum of the Research Department of the Universal House of Justice concerning this matter, which was forwarded to the present author, it is stated that in 'the Tablet of 'Abdu'l-Baha in question' which 'is dated 10 Rajab 1297 (19 June 1880)',²⁸ he 'alludes to His visit to Beirut, but He does not provide specific dates'. A provisional translation of the relevant passage is presented as follows:

... and this servant has, as a thing divinely ordained, been unwell for some time past, until I went to Beirut for a change of air. I have recently come back from there and at present I am staying at the village of Yarkā which lies on a hill some 18 kilometres from 'Akka, and I intend to remain here for a while.

Praise be to God, the Lord of mankind, that the illness is now remedied, though a state of infirmity still persists. Moreover, I am overshadowed by the bounties of God from every side.²⁹

Moreover, it is pointed out in the memorandum that 'in a copy of this Tablet in the handwriting of Mirza Aqa Jan, held in the World Centre archives, the date 1 Rajab 1297 appears, corresponding to 9 June 1880 in the Gregorian calendar'.³⁰

Having fixed the approximate date of the visit and the actual day of the revelation of Baha'u'llah's *Lawh-i Ard-i Bā*, we may well ask about the circumstances, since Hasan Balyuzi states that 'Abdu'l-Baha went to Beirut by the 'express invitation' of Midhat Pasha.

²⁵ *Thamarāt al-Funūn*, 29 Jumāda ath-thānī 1297/8 June 1880 (Tuesday), p. 1.

قدم الى بلدنا جناب العالم الفاضل الذكي الماجد عباس افندي نزيل مدينة عكا و قدومه بقصد
تبدیل الهواء اناله الله الصحة

²⁶ This is because of the illegibility of many issues of this newspaper at the Library of the University of Haifa. My thanks to Prof. Butrus Abu-Manneh for bringing this newspaper to my attention and to Dr. Fruma Zachs for providing access to the newspaper *al-Janna* (though no mention of 'Abbas Effendi could be found here).

²⁷ E-mail of Erica Leith (George Ronald Books) to Moojan Momen, dated 19 August 2004, forwarded to Necati Alkan on the same date. According to the e-mail the information that formed the basis for this change came from Mr Abdullah Mesbah, a former member of the Research Department at the Baha'i World Centre.

²⁸ This corresponds actually to 18 June 1880.

²⁹ Research Department Memorandum dated 9 December 2004.

³⁰ Ibid.

Mirza Haydar 'Ali on Midhat Pasha's encounter with 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Akka

As mentioned previously, the *vâli* Midhat Pasha visited Haifa during his inspection of Palestine. There is other evidence apart from the German source above that he also visited 'Akka.³¹ But the only published reference in a Baha'i source known to the present author that mentions Midhat Pasha's visit to 'Akka is by Husayn 'Avariḥ' Ayati. Interestingly, he also says that Midhat met 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Akka and became so much his admirer that he also met 'Abdu'l-Baha in Beirut; and that Baha'u'llah permitted his son to journey to Beirut where the 'young tree of the friendship with the Pasha was nourished'.³² According to Ayati the visit of the Pasha to 'Akka and his meeting with 'Abdu'l-Baha thus occurred before the latter's visit to Beirut, and we have the first, albeit brief, reference to an encounter between Midhat Pasha and 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Akka. This important information seems to have escaped the attention of later Baha'i historians and can be supported now by another source.

Recently a Persian manuscript that is an autograph by the noted Baha'i Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali, kept at the Archives of the Baha'i World Centre in Haifa, has surfaced, which mentions Midhat Pasha's meetings with 'Abdu'l-Baha in, and near, 'Akka in some detail.³³ Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali was an exceptional Iranian Baha'i, who propagated the Baha'i Faith very actively. He spent nine years in prison and exile in Khartoum (Sudan), travelled far and wide in Iran, and passed away in 1920 in the Holy Land. Baha'i pilgrims from the West knew him as the 'Angel of Mount Carmel'. He spent some time in the presence of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha in the Holy Land and wrote memoirs of this.³⁴ His account of Midhat Pasha's meeting with 'Abdu'l-Baha serves as the historical background of the encounter in the 'Land of Ba' and the revelation of the tablet in question. The date of the manuscript's composition is not clear, but it is after the death of Midhat Pasha in May 1884, since the author speaks about 'the late Midhat Pasha'.

Mirza Haydar 'Ali begins his account by introducing Midhat Pasha as the one who established democracy in the Ottoman domains, toppled Sultan Abdülaziz from his throne and brought about his death, as prophesied by Baha'u'llah in his Arabic *Lawḥ-i Ra'īs* ('Tablet to the Chief') addressed to Âli Pasha, who then was changing roles between the office of prime and foreign minister with Fu'ad Pasha. In that passage Baha'u'llah states that Âli's attempts to attack the religion of God (i.e. the Baha'i Faith) are futile, and he predicts the capture of Edirne. According to Baha'i interpretation, the war between the Ottomans and Russia in 1877/1878 fulfilled this prediction when the Russians occupied Edirne.³⁵ A clearer reference

³¹ British consular records state that Midhat Pasha visited Haifa and 'Akka in May 1880; Public Record Office (London, UK), FO 195 1201 and 1306; see Balyuzi, *Baha'u'llah* 378, footnote.

³² Ayati, *al-Kawākib ad-Durriyya* 2:17.

³³ I am grateful to Sohail Farhad for bringing this source to my attention. The Baha'i World Centre Archives cataloguing of this item is: 'M1239, Work proving authenticity of the Baha'i Faith. Holograph, over 400 pages, some pages missing. Also some articles and essays, including about the martyrs of Yazd and other places (ZAM: Papers of Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali).' I am beholden to the Universal House of Justice for providing the photocopies of the pages 198–200 of this unpublished manuscript (Baha'i World Centre, Memorandum to Necati Alkan, dated 15 June 2004).

³⁴ On Haji Mirza Haydar 'Ali, see his *Bihjat aṣ-ṣudūr* (Bombay 1914; reprinted Hofheim: Baha'i-Verlag, 159 BE/2002); idem *Stories from The Delight of Hearts* (Los Angeles: Kalimat Press, 1980); Hasan M. Balyuzi, *Eminent Baha'is in the time of Baha'u'llah* (Oxford: George Ronald, 1985) 237–50; Habib Mu'ayyad, *Khātirāt-i Habīb* (Hofheim: Baha'i-Verlag, 2004) 2:15–17.

³⁵ See Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1980, rev. ed.) 64 and idem, *God Passes By* 225–26.

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to the removal of Abdülaziz is to be found in Baha'u'llah's *Lawḥ-i Fu'ād*: 'Soon will We dismiss the one ('Ali Pasha) who was like unto him (Fu'ad Pasha) and will lay hold on their Chief (Sulṭan 'Abdu'l-'Aziz) who ruleth the land, and I, verily, am the Almighty, the All-Compelling.'³⁶

The author then refers to the discord between Sultan Abdülhamid and Midhat Pasha, the former having the minister appointed *vâli* of Syria in order to counter his influence in Istanbul. Once in Syria, Midhat set out to reform that region for the well-being of its people. Mirza Haydar 'Ali says that it was highly recommended to the governor that he stay during his inspection in the 'Riḍvân Garden' which, at that time, had been rented by 'Abdu'l-Baha. That garden was originally known as 'Na'mayn' and used to be a small island in a river and has a special place in Baha'u'llah's writings. Shoghi Effendi makes mention of this location as follows: 'The garden of Na'mayn, a small island, situated in the middle of a river to the east of the city, honoured with the appellation of Riḍvân, and designated by Him [Baha'u'llah] the "New Jerusalem" and "Our Verdant Isle," had, together with the residence of 'Abdu'llah Pasha – rented and prepared for Him by 'Abdu'l-Bahā, and situated a few miles north of 'Akka – become by now the favourite retreats of One [Baha'u'llah] Who, for almost a decade, had not set foot beyond the city walls, and Whose sole exercise had been to pace, in monotonous repetition, the floor of His bed-chamber.'³⁷ 'Abdu'l-Baha, who was responsible for the external affairs of Baha'u'llah and the band of his followers, was asked whether Midhat Pasha could stay there and 'Abdu'l-Baha – Haydar 'Ali calls him Sarkār Āqā³⁸ – granted permission.

One of the essential statements of this account is that Midhat Pasha had information about 'Abdu'l-Baha through the praise of him by many intellectuals. Among these were probably the above-mentioned Namık Kemal and Ziya Pasha. The Ottoman intellectual Süleyman Nazif writes: 'When I met 'Abbas Efendi ... two years ago [1917] in the town of Haifa he told me with complete sorrow that he had an extensive correspondence with Kemal Bey but that out of worry about investigation and persecution in the time of Sultan Abdülhamid II, he had burnt those letters.'³⁹ Kemal lived in banishment in Cyprus from 1873 to 1876 and was perhaps in touch with 'Abdu'l-Baha through the Baha'i exile Mishkin Qalam. Nazif, moreover, remarks that 'Abdu'l-Baha was acquainted with Ziya Pasha and was in contact with him.⁴⁰ The advocacy of Midhat Pasha, Namık Kemal and Ziya Pasha, in the 1860s and 1870s, for democracy (i.e. constitutional monarchy) in the Ottoman Empire coincided and converged with the reform proposals of Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha on these issues.⁴¹

³⁶ Arabic in *Athār-i Qalam-i A'lā*, vol. 1: *al-Kitāb al-Mubīn* (Bombay, 1890, see <http://www.h-net.org/~bahai/areprint/baha/A-F/F/fuada.htm>, viewed 16 November 2004) 210–14; English trans., *The Summons of the Lord of Hosts* (Haifa: Baha'i World Centre, 2002) 179; translated by Shoghi Effendi in *The Promised Day is Come* 64 and idem *God Passes By* 208–209.

³⁷ Shoghi Effendi, *God Passes By* 192.

³⁸ *Sarkār Āqā*, 'His Excellency the Master', was a title given by Baha'u'llah to 'Abdu'l-Baha; see Lady Blomfield, *The Chosen Highway* (Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1975) 62. The meanings 'steward, administrator, manager, superintendent, supervisor', of *sarkār* or *sar-kār* well describe 'Abdu'l-Baha's position in the external affairs of the Baha'i community in the Ottoman Empire; s.v. *sar-kār* in the *Steingass Persian-English Dictionary* (online at <http://dsal.uchicago.edu/dictionaries/steingass>, viewed 16 November 2004) and *serkar* in the *Redhouse Turkish-English Dictionary* (ed. U. Bahadır Alkim, Nazime Antel, Robert Avery et al., Istanbul).

³⁹ *Nastruddin Şah ve Babiler* (Istanbul: Kanaat Kütüphanesi, 1923) 53–4.

⁴⁰ Ibid 52.

⁴¹ On the contacts between reformers in the Ottoman Empire and the Baha'is, see Necati Alkan, 'Ottoman Reform Movements and the Baha'i Faith, 1860s-1920s', in Moshe Sharon (ed.), *Studies in Modern Religions, Religious*

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Another interesting and novel aspect mentioned by Haydar 'Ali is that Midhat had heard about 'Abdu'l-Baha's utterances in Turkish, which were a proof of his immense knowledge. 'Abdu'l-Baha's pre-eminence in the Turkish language is attested by Haydar 'Ali in the paragraph⁴² preceding the account of Midhat Pasha's visit to 'Akka. He says that 'Abdu'l-Baha's clear and adequate replies to inquiries about spiritual matters (*masā'il-i ilāhiyyih*) in most eloquent Turkish (*bi-zabān-i Turkī-yi faṣīḥ-i balīgh*) caused the eloquent and learned men (*fūṣahā, wa bulaghā wa fuḍalā*) of Turkistan to confess their weakness ('*ajz*) and made them humble and lowly (*khāḍī' wa khāshi*).⁴³ 'Abdu'l-Baha's profound knowledge of Turkish was also affirmed later by Ottoman intellectuals who met him; such as: 'The Shaykh spoke the Turkish language very well.'⁴⁴ Another observer remarks: "Abbas Effendi's firm grasp and proficiency in each of the Arabic, Turkish and Persian languages is indeed astonishing. In all three languages he is capable in prose and poetry like a native speaker."⁴⁵

The account of Mirza Haydar 'Ali further points out that Midhat had pressed for a meeting with 'Abdu'l-Baha which the latter accepted, and that the pasha paid a return visit to 'Abdu'l-Baha in 'Akka. During his days with 'Abdu'l-Baha, Midhat is portrayed as having been delighted and meek in the presence of 'Abdu'l-Baha. Before returning to Beirut, the *vāli* invited 'Abdu'l-Baha to Beirut, but he declined. Midhat afterwards wrote to 'Abdu'l-Baha from Beirut and communicated, in a couplet, his desire to meet him. Haydar 'Ali notes that Baha'u'llah thereupon ordered his son to honour Beirut with his visit. Following 'Abdu'l-Baha's departure, Baha'u'llah revealed the Tablet of the Land of Bā, which Haydar 'Ali quotes.

Mirza Haydar 'Ali's account ends by stating that Midhat Pasha was responsible for the release of Baha'u'llah from imprisonment in 'Akka. On this issue Shoghi Effendi remarks that it was 'Abdu'l-Baha who 'had been chiefly instrumental in providing the necessary means for Baha'u'llah's release from His nine-year confinement within the city walls of 'Akka, and in enabling Him to enjoy, in the evening of His life, a measure of that peace and security from which He had so long been debarred'.⁴⁶ In the *Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bā* of June 1880, Baha'u'llah mentions that 'the doors of the prison were opened'. The meeting between Midhat Pasha and 'Abdu'l-Baha took place slightly more than nine years after Baha'u'llah's arrival in 'Akka; it is not clear when Midhat communicated his suggestion regarding the release of Baha'u'llah, if indeed he ever made such a suggestion.

Movements and the Babi-Baha'i Faiths (Leiden: Brill, 2004) 253–74; idem 'The Babis and Baha'is in the Ottoman Empire and Turkey, 1844–1928', Ph.D. thesis, Ruhr-Universität Bochum/Germany, 2004.

⁴² Page 198.

⁴³ Turkistan probably meant just the Ottoman domains but could mean that by that time (1880), 'Abdu'l-Baha's fame and his Turkish writings had even spread beyond the Middle East as far as Turkistan in the sense of the Turkic-speaking regions east of Iran; in other words, Transoxania (also spelled Transoxiana); in Arabic *Mā Warā' An-nahr* ('That Which Lies Beyond the River'), the historical region of Turkistan in Central Asia east of the Amu Darya (Oxus River) and west of the Syr Darya (Jaxartes River), roughly corresponding to present-day Uzbekistan and parts of Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan. Whereas Turkish is the official language of Turkey, the term 'Turkic' includes various dialects of the Altaic language family stretching from the Balkans to Siberia. 'Abdu'l-Baha mastered at least Ottoman Turkish and the Turkic dialects of Caucasia; for this, see tablets and prayers of 'Abdu'l-Baha in *Majmū'ih-yi Alwāḥ wa Munājāthā-yi Turkī* (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi Millī-yi Matbū'āt-i Amrā, BE 127/1970–71).

⁴⁴ Mehmet Refik (Temimi)/ Mehmet Behcet (Yazar), 'Babiler ve Babizm Hakkında Tedkikât-ı Mahalliyye' in *Beyrut Vilayeti* (vol. 1: Cenub Kısmı, Vilayet Matbaası: 1333/1917) 269–80 (here 273).

⁴⁵ Abdülğani Senî, 'Garb'a Meydan Okuyan Bir Hakîm-i Şark' in *Servet-i Fünûn*, no. 1216, 11 Eylül 1330/4 Zilkâde 1332, s. 308–13 (here 310).

⁴⁶ *God Passes By* 241.

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In conclusion, Mirza Haydar 'Ali's account presents the 'Akka meeting between these two illustrious figures of the late 19th century Middle East as the prelude to the Beirut visit and the revelation of Baha'u'llah's *Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bā*. We may surmise that Midhat also met Baha'u'llah during this visit to 'Akka. More sources, Baha'i and non-Baha'i, are needed to ascertain this and the details of what passed between 'Abdu'l-Baha and Midhat Pasha during their meetings.

Annotated translation of Mirza Haydar 'Ali's account:⁴⁷

The late Midhat Pasha, prime minister and the founder of democracy (*mu'assis-i jumhūr*) in the Ottoman Empire, was the cause of the removal and annihilation ('*azl wa maḥw*) of his Excellency, the late Sultan Abdülaziz Khan that was foretold in the *Lawḥ-i Ra'īs*. The Lord – glorified is He – says: 'Hast thou imagined thyself capable of extinguishing the fire which God hath kindled in the heart of creation? Nay, by Him Who is the Eternal Truth, couldst thou but know it. Rather, on account of what thy hands have wrought, it blazed higher and burned more fiercely. Ere long will it encompass the earth and all that dwell therein. Thus hath it been decreed by God, and the powers⁴⁸ of earth and heaven are unable to thwart His purpose. The day is approaching when the Land of Mystery [Edirne] and what is beside it⁴⁹ shall be changed, and shall pass out of⁵⁰ the hands of the King ...'⁵¹

When the sultanate passed over to Sultan Abdülhamid [II] he wished to rule in a despotic manner (*istibdād-rā mīkh'āst*), and Midhat Pasha did not wish that. So he [the Sultan] plotted (*asbāb-chīnī namūd*) [against him]. And the Council took counsel together [and agreed] that Midhat Pasha's stay in the capital [Istanbul] was not appropriate. They appointed that well-wisher of the state, of the people and the subjects as governor of the province of Damascus, Beirut and the Holy Land. To put [the affairs of the province] in order (*barā-yi naẓm*), he would travel to the cities and towns under his government. For his arrival in 'Akka, there was no better and more pleasant place than the Riḍvān Garden. They asked Sarkār Āqā ['Abdu'l-Baha] – may the lives of all be a sacrifice unto Him – whether he [Midhat Pasha] could be honoured with staying in the Riḍvan Garden, and He gave permission. He [Midhat Pasha] arrived and because His Holiness ['Abdu'l-Baha] was a prisoner according to outer circumstances, He did not pay a visit. That great vizier (*wazīr-i kabūr*) was very pleased by the condition, beauty and purity of the garden and by its flowers. He recognized out of perspicacity that it belonged to Sarkār Āqā. He asked and they answered in the affirmative. He said: 'For years I have longed to meet Him. I have seen His utterances in Turkish that are beyond like or equal and eloquently testify to His vast knowledge. I have often heard many of the learned highly praising and extolling Him.' (*sanawāt ast kih ṭālib-i ziyārat-i shān hastam wa bayānāt-i shān kih dar turkī mithl wa mānand na-dārad wa az ihātīh-yi 'ilmīyyih-yi ishān ḥākīst ziyārat namūdih-am wa madḥ wa sitāyish-i shān-rā az dānishmandān bisyār*

⁴⁷ The kind assistance of Siyamak Zabihi-Moghaddam with the Persian manuscript is greatly appreciated. The passages from the *Lawḥ-i Ra'īs* and the *Lawḥ-i Arḍ-i Bā* that Mirza Haydar 'Ali quotes both have minor alterations; this is pointed out in footnotes. Wherever reference is made to Baha'u'llah and 'Abdu'l-Baha by the Baha'i author, words such as 'He,' 'His' and 'Him' are rendered with capital initial letters, this being from the point of view of a devoted believer. And whenever it was deemed necessary names, comments and original Persian words are inserted into the translation.

⁴⁸ In Mirza Haydar 'Ali's manuscript (MHA ms.): لا يقوم مع امره جنود من في السموات و الارض

⁴⁹ In MHA ms. 'what is beside it' ما دونها is missing.

⁵⁰ In MHA ms.: و تخرج من

⁵¹ *Majmū'ih-yi Alwāh ba'd az Kitāb-i Aqdas* 65–66; English translation in *Summons* 142–43.

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shanādh-am) He despatched a messenger saying, 'I yearn to meet His Excellency (*ziyārat-i ḥaḍrat-i 'ālī bi-jān tālibam*).' He ['Abdu'l-Baha] honoured him with a visit. He [Midhat] was so attracted (*majdhūb shud*) [by 'Abdu'l-Baha] that he paid a return visit; he was humble and lowly (*khāḍi' wa khāshi' gashī*). During the two or three days he stayed, he was for the most part honoured by 'Abdu'l-Baha's presence. He asked ['Abdu'l-Baha] to accompany him and adorn Beirut with His blessed arrival (*bi-maqdam-i mubārak muzayyan farmāyand*). He ['Abdu'l-Baha] excused Himself. He [Midhat] wrote from Beirut:

The desire of meeting thee made my soul to be at death's door
Should it return or enter, what is thy command?⁵²

The Ancient Beauty (*Jamāl-i Mubārak*, i.e. Baha'u'llah), therefore, bade Him to honour Beirut with His visit (*amr farmūdand tashrīf-farmā-yi bayrūt shawand*). He was in Beirut when this holy and exalted Tablet [*Lawḥ-i Ard-i Bā*] flung open a myriad doors of this visible existent world, nay, the Kingdom of God, to the face of men. It testifies that His ['Abdu'l-Baha's] servitude (*'ubūdiyyat*), selflessness (*fanā*), complete self-effacement (*maḥwīyyat*) and detachment (*in'idām*) had no peer and will have no equal:

He is God, Glorified be He, Grandeur and Might are His!⁵³

Praise be to Him Who hath honoured the Land of Bā⁵⁴ through the presence of Him round Whom all names revolve. All the atoms of the earth have announced unto all created things that from behind the gate of the Prison-city there hath appeared and above its horizon there hath shone forth⁵⁵ the Orb of the beauty of the great, the Most Mighty Branch of God—His ancient and immutable Mystery—proceeding on its way to another land. Sorrow, thereby, hath enveloped this Prison-city, whilst another land rejoiceth. Exalted, immeasurably exalted is our Lord, the Fashioner of the heavens and the Creator of all things, He through Whose sovereignty the doors of the prison were opened, thereby causing what was promised aforesaid in the Tablets to be fulfilled. He is verily potent over what He willeth, and in His grasp is the dominion of the entire creation. He is the All-Powerful, the All-Knowing, the All-Wise.

Blessed, doubly blessed, is the ground which His footsteps have trodden, the eye that hath been cheered by the beauty of His countenance, the ear that hath been honoured by hearkening to His call, the heart that hath tasted the sweetness of His love, the breast that hath dilated through His remembrance, the pen that hath voiced His praise, the scroll that hath borne the testimony of His writings. We beseech God—blessed and exalted be He—that⁵⁶ He may honour us with meeting Him soon. He is, in truth, the All-Hearing, the All-Powerful, He Who is ready to answer.⁵⁷

⁵² قصد دیدار تو دارد جان بر لب آمد باز گردد یا برآید چیست فرمان شما

⁵³ هو الله تعالى شأنه العظمة و الاقتدار This heading is not translated in *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* and is thus my provisional translation.

⁵⁴ Beirut. This Tablet is 'a letter dictated by Baha'u'llah and addressed by Mirza Aqa Jan, His amanuensis, to 'Abdu'l-Baha while the latter was on a visit to Beirut.' (Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Baha'u'llah*, Wilmette: Baha'i Publishing Trust, 1991, 136).

⁵⁵ 'hath appeared and above its horizon there hath shone forth' is in MHA ms.: طلع و لاح و ظهر و اشراق و خرج

⁵⁶ بأن is in MHA ms.

⁵⁷ *Tablets of Baha'u'llah* 227–28.

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This wise old vizier (*waz̄ir-i khirad-p̄ir*) wrote to the Sublime Porte [Ottoman Government] (*bi-'aliyyih niwisht*) that 'Akka is an important trade centre (*mawqi '-i tijārāt-i 'azīmih*) and a good port city (*bandar-i khūbī*) that should be open by day and by night as a means of passage and that the rebels and criminals should be transferred to another place. They accepted, and so it happened, and the confinement [of Baha'u'llah] in the Prison (*qal'ih-bandī wa khārij na-shudan*) was ended. Thus has it been decreed by Him Who is the All-Powerful, the Almighty.